

Capital Chronicle

by Suzanne Garment

Soviet Connection: How Much Proof Do We Need?

"No, I haven't heard anything," said a senator much involved in foreign affairs. "Maybe it's because I've been absorbed in the defense appropriation." An aide to Sen. Claiborne Pell (D., R.I.) allowed, "He hasn't been following this one particularly closely." Stuart Eizenstat, a former high Carter administration official and now a Washington lawyer said, "I've been on the Hill since the story broke. I've been talking to senators and representatives. The staggering thing is that this has not had any major impact."

These local citizens were talking about Washington's reaction to the huge front-page story by free-lance journalist Claire Sterling in last Sunday's New York Times. Ms. Sterling had gotten hold of a still-unreleased report by Italy's state prosecutor concluding that the Bulgarian government had indeed hired and controlled the man who shot the pope.

Her news was a shocker. True, from the day three years ago when a Turkish gunman struck down John Paul II in St. Peter's Square, a few writers and reporters had pursued the "Bulgarian connection." Ms. Sterling was one. So was Marvin Kalb, chief diplomatic correspondent for NBC News. Mr. Kalb remembers that while he worked, some American intelligence officials undertook "a deliberate, sustained effort to undercut the validity of the story." And the foreign-policy establishment voiced sophisticated doubt: The Russians would never run such a sloppy operation and risk making a martyr of the pope.

Now, with the prosecutor's report, the Italian judicial system is moving quite deliberately toward confirmation of the worst suspicions about the Bulgarian role. The report leaves little doubt that the Italians also believe the Soviets ultimately pulled the strings. Mind you, this is from Italians—no American hawk paranoids but in-

stead people who live with a new government it seems every 30 days. You simply cannot doubt their word.

For the first time we cannot avoid the full horror of what the Soviets have done. They shot the pope. This was not just stealing an election in some Godforsaken place or jabbing a poor slob in the leg with a poisoned umbrella or slipping a venom cocktail to some miserable Third World leader whom no one would ever miss. This was the actual pope, symbol of God's spirit through time on earth not only in theory but even occasionally in fact. How are we to deal with a regime that no longer fears to commit such a crime?

Washington seems to entertain none of these large worries. Since the report is not yet official the Reagan administration cannot make much of an official response. But as late as this week, Mr. Kalb reports, some American intelligence types were still saying that the assassin was "controlled" for the purpose of running drugs into Western Europe but shot the pope on his own.

Michael Ledeen, a foreign-policy scholar and consultant to the State and Defense departments, is a longtime exponent of the Bulgarian connection. He expressed no surprise this week that parts of our government should resist the implications of the news about the pope. The trouble was not just ideological: Even some hawks had always maintained that the formidable Russians would not run an operation as inept as the one that wounded the pontiff.

For some time, he explained, our government has not been good at gathering the type of information crucial to this case. The shooting was characterized as a domestic matter and investigated by the Italian judicial system, not by an intelligence agency with which our agents have many contacts. Our people did not know enough to be convinced of the Bulgarian plot, and our high government officials are reluctant to challenge the judgment of their own troops. By now our people have developed a stake in their own theories and a typical case of bureaucratic resentment. They've become stubborn customers.

An editor of a national news magazine said he had heard just about nothing in the wake of the Times story and pointed to structural reasons why the press, too, was keeping quiet. There was no conspiracy,

but journalists will always denigrate a story they didn't get first. "Oh," they'll say, "we already knew that." There was also an ideological component. The theory of Bulgarian involvement had bloomed mainly in the right-wing press. This devalued the story in the eyes of establishment journalists. "They think it's a version of Redbaiting, and that they're much too sophisticated for such things," the magazine editor said.

Kenneth Adelman, head of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, has also come across a lot of silence: "The pope story arouses no self-doubt in true arms controllers. They just keep repeating that we and the Soviets have a common stake in preventing nuclear war. But dialogue doesn't moderate Soviet behavior. I've actually made up a chart for the years 1972 through 1979, showing how we keep talking to them and they keep right on doing unpleasant things. We sign SALT I and they ship new weapons to North Vietnam; we sign SALT II, they put a brigade in Cuba. Are there any circumstances under which we're finally supposed to say 'no'?"

Students of American foreign policy today all read the work by Roberta Wohlstetter telling how America ignored the warning it got about the impending Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. The information was lost among too many messages and too much clever explaining away. So far, the Bulgarian story here is sinking like a stone, and we can see clearly how our foreign-policy elite's routines and assumptions conspire to keep it at the bottom of the lake.